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ABSTRACT

This paper offers guidelines for the selection of elementary and secondary education curriculum materials that properly recognize the variety of ethnic and cultural diversity within U.S. society. Two areas are addressed. The first is understanding the concept of culture when examining multicultural materials. The second is the determination of the specific function for which the multicultural materials are intended. It warns that exposure to a culture without explanation can be misleading and demeaning and that teachers who understand the various ways in which culture can shape the ideas and lives of students are the best suited to select materials for students. Factors that should be considered in determining the suitability of multicultural materials include: (1) whether they tie in with the teacher's multicultural goals; (2) whether they relate to the activities at hand and are realistic within the context described; (3) whether the teacher has an adequate understanding of the experiences related in the material to permit satisfactory interpretation of the content, and (4) whether and to what extent the teacher can handle material if it is of a controversial nature. (GLR)

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Selecting Curriculum Material to Reflect Our Culturally Diverse Society

One of the many curriculum focuses in education in the last two decades has been the attempt to properly recognize the diverse ethnic and cultural groups within our society. The ensuing effort to incorporate multiethnic and multicultural materials into the regular classroom has necessitated, among other things, the establishment of guidelines for the evaluation and selection of instructional materials to verify that such materials do indeed give proper recognition to the various ethnic and cultural groups.

Presently such guidelines only outline the general criteria for selecting instructional materials. These guidelines typically stress that materials should be realistic, factual, balanced, and objective in order to eliminate stereotyping, tokenism, misconception, and oversimplification. Such criteria are applicable to any geographical area or to any minority or cultural group.

While such general guidelines are necessary, it is equally important that educators impose additional, yet more specific, criteria relative to

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the immediate target population and the academic and social climate within which that instruction takes place. Two important areas of consideration are examined in this paper. The first area is the concept of "culture". The second point of discussion is the determination of the specific function for which the multicultural materials are intended.

To view students only in accordance with their ethnicity or race results in the selection of materials which assumedly represent a composite of "typical" members of a particular ethnic group. The proper selection of multicultural materials necessitates a more complex view of the term "culture" than we often afford it. Ethnicity or race is only one aspect of the many-faceted term "culture". Unfortunately, many educators are unaware of how culture operates and how it can become a deterministic and limiting force. This limiting force may be either a real one or a perceived one. Whichever the case, the teacher who understands the various ways in which culture can shape the ideas and lives of our students is best in the position to select materials for students.

To better understand any given culture, teachers need to examine the various factors which affect one's life style. Areas of consideration would include the following:

. social stratification based on economic status

- degree of acculturation and ethnic/racial self-identity
- experiential background
- language and language patterns
- geographical location
- gender

These considerations obviously overlap and influence each other. The socio-economic status of the student may influence the degree of acculturation and experiential background, which in turn might affect language patterns. Likewise, geographical location may affect experiential background and ethnic self-identity. For example, the acculturated minority student may not take as great an interest in ethnic materials as does the less acculturated one. Nor is the Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican student in New York likely to have the same language needs as the rural Mexican-American migrant in South Texas. However, until fairly recently it was not unusual to find bilingual program materials written by Puerto Rican writers being used in South Texas.

As teachers we likely teach our students that generalizations should be supported by substantiating data and pertinent illustrations. We stress this when teaching the inductive thinking process. We need to keep in mind, and teach our students, that misconceptions or stereotypes often

result from a faulty inductive process. As a point of illustration, if we conclude that the characteristic aspect of the food "chittlings" is its racial derivation, then we have oversimplified the concept of "culture". Chittlings stem from an economic basis, not a racial one. Historically, "waste" parts of animals, in this case the intestines of the pig, have been discarded by the affluent culture and utilized by the impoverished as a means of survival. What was once a food of acquired taste based on economic necessity has since become an item of choice, and probably every group that has ever suffered economic deprivation has similar foods that have come to be associated with that group.

The important point for teachers to keep in mind is that any exposure to a culture, or any apparent manifestation of that culture, is not the same as understanding that culture. Exposure without explanation can be very misleading and /or demeaning, and can do more harm than good, for it ignores the historical realities that led to such "cultural" characteristics.

When examining multicultural materials, we must realize that the complexity of the term "culture" will occasionally make reality relative. Any material is going to be written or produced from a certain point of view or perspective. Cultural relativism demands that we see a culture

only through the eyes of the people living that culture. Therefore, no one individual can write or speak for an entire ethnic/racial group. To do so assumes a homogeneity of beliefs, values, behaviors, aspirations, and even degree of ethnic/racial self-identity which simply doesn't exist.

The second major criterion the teacher must consider in selecting multicultural resources is the specific function for which those materials are intended. One's perception or interpretation of the concept of multicultural education itself will obviously influence the selection of materials. Many take a very limited approach, studying the exotic customs and behaviors of ethnic/racial groups and celebrating ethnic holidays or observing ethnic weeks. Such approaches are often accompanied by the preparation and consumption of foods which assumedly characterize that ethnic group. On the other hand, some teachers will attempt to totally integrate multicultural materials into all aspects of the curriculum, using the materials to make the concept under study more culturally and experientially relevant. The latter approach is pedagogically more sound and beneficial to students, particularly in the culturally diverse and heterogeneous society in which we live. Different values, lifestyles, social strata, gender issues, etc. have increasingly become more important than one's ancestry.

While there is a significant amount of multicultural material available, with great potential for study in the classroom, this does not mean it will automatically fit all classrooms. Factors which should be considered by a teacher to determine suitability of multicultural material, would include the following questions:

- Does it tie in with your multicultural goals?
- Is the material chosen the best available for the particular objective being studied?
- Is there continuity between this particular piece of material and the other material used prior to this point?
- Will the chosen material relate to the activities at hand?
- Will the students relate to the material and will it broaden their learning?
- Is the material realistic within the context described? If it is not realistic are you aware of such and prepared to handle it accordingly?
- Do you have an adequate understanding of the experience related in the material to satisfactorily interpret the content?
- If the material is controversial, can you effectively handle such controversy?

If we are to progress beyond mere token attempts at multiculturalizing the curriculum, then we must seriously begin to educate our students to a better understanding of the complexity of the

concept of multiculturalism and the realization that such a concept can be a viable and exciting one only if given the serious consideration it deserves.